

Japan opens Digital Agency to boost government technology

September 1 2021, by Mari Yamaguchi



Japan's Digital Transformation Minister Takuya Hirai, right, and newly appointed chief digital officer Yoko Ishikura pose for a photo during a ceremony to launch Digital Agency in Tokyo Wednesday, Sept. 1, 2021. Japan was looking to give its government services and record keeping a technological upgrade with Wednesday's launch of the agency, hoping to bring a much needed overhaul to antiquated systems that have had their shortfalls highlighted by the pandemic. The sign reads " Digital Agency." Credit: Kyodo News via AP

Japan looked to give a technological upgrade to government services and recordkeeping with the Digital Agency opened Wednesday to overhaul antiquated systems that have had their shortfalls highlighted by the pandemic.

Japan currently relies heavily on old-fashioned paperwork for its people to apply for government services, while central and local government offices use different systems to store and manage data, lacking compatibility.

The lack of digitalization in government services for the public became a major problem during the pandemic, causing delays and mishandling of applications for financial subsidies and support, as well as slowing medical data transmission needed for virus measures.

Fax-based data sharing at local health centers caused delays in recording and sharing information related to COVID-19 patients. Problems were also reported with the vaccination reservation system and a separate system for giving updates on the rollout. A lack of digitalization also caused delays at many schools early in the pandemic last year as they switched to online classes.

Promotion of digitalization has been one of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's political priorities since he took office last September. Some of the problems raised by the pandemic have since been improved, but the formation of the new agency is aimed at cementing such changes and expanding them elsewhere.



Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, right, poses with Digital Transformation Minister Takuya Hirai following a launch of a new Digital Agency, at Suga's official residence in Tokyo Wednesday, Sept. 1, 2021. Japan was looking to give its government services and record keeping a technological upgrade with Wednesday's launch of the agency, hoping to bring a much needed overhaul to antiquated systems that have had their shortfalls highlighted by the pandemic. Credit: Kyodo News via AP

Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato said the government through the Digital Agency will strive to promote a society where all citizens can enjoy the convenience of digital services without causing "digital divide" and privacy concerns.

The agency, headed by Digital Transformation Minister Takuya Hirai,

has about 600 staff, including 200 hired from the private sector, with the remainder transferred from other ministries.

The agency aims to digitalize administrative procedures in 31 areas such as elderly care and childrearing, while standardizing different systems used by municipalities within five years, officials said. The agency will also aim to digitalize COVID-19 vaccine certificates by the end of the year.

Citizens will be able to obtain official family registration records needed to obtain passports or other purposes without submitting or mailing a form to government offices. The agency will also promote use of a 12-digit personal number that can be used as identification to access bank accounts and other public and private services.

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Citation: Japan opens Digital Agency to boost government technology (2021, September 1) retrieved 17 April 2024 from

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